

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

Volume 62
Number 3 Issues 3-4 (September–December
2014): *Filipino Catholicism*

Article 13

10-2-2014

Figuring Catholicism: An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu by Julius J. Bautista

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Recommended Citation

Concepcion, Review Author: (2014) "Figuring Catholicism: An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu by Julius J. Bautista," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 62: No. 3, Article 13.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.4056>
Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol62/iss3/13>

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philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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Julius J. Bautista

*Figuring Catholicism:
An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu*

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 62 nos. 3–4 (2014): 579–83

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Book Reviews

JULIUS J. BAUTISTA

Figuring Catholicism: An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010. 249 pages.

Julius Bautista is a Filipino-Australian anthropologist, who is presently Senior Lecturer in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He is likewise affiliated with the Asia Research Institute's Religion and Globalisation in Asian Contexts Cluster. Bautista conducts research on religion and material culture in Southeast Asia, with a focus on the Philippines, particularly Cebu and Pampanga. In his works Bautista uses history and anthropology to understand how religious icons have been constructed to become significant symbols of faith.

Figuring Catholicism is based on Julius Bautista's dissertation at the Australian National University, under Reynaldo Ileto's supervision. The book is an insightful critique of the processes by which the Santo Niño, or the image of the child Jesus as king, has become "enshrined" as a symbol of Philippine Catholicism. The author delves into the "historical, political, and cultural circumstances, in which some versions of the Santo Niño's story are considered more dominant, more official than others, thereby facilitating their transmission among Filipinos across time and space" (6). He engages the "episodic" rather than the "epic" history to discover how the Santo Niño and Catholicism have been "figured" in these instances in Philippine history. Bautista uses discourse analysis to understand how encounters of

varying discourses, with roots in Spanish and American colonialisms, have produced this ubiquitous symbol in the Catholic Philippines. He also looks at ways “in which Filipinos sought to subvert their primacy in the crafting of their own counter-discourses” like folk religiosity (7), an approach akin to those of Ileta and Vicente Rafael.

At the outset Bautista is keen to problematize his position as a Philippine-born scholar based overseas, as his diasporic character bears significantly upon his scholarship. Although not the focus of the book, the author’s connection with his subject is worth mentioning. Born in Cebu and raised in Manila and Sydney, Bautista sees his scholarship as fuelled by both nostalgia for home and a scholarly pursuit (12–15). He situates his fieldwork in Cebu between “coming home” in a sentimental sense and “doing fieldwork” in a professionally academic sense” (13) and thereby demonstrates that, while nostalgia can form an idealized notion of the past, scholarly research can undermine that ideal and bring it back to reality. The fruits of his fieldwork are unique insights about the dominant position of the Santo Niño in Filipino Catholic belief. As he interrogates the ascendancy of the icon, he introduces unconventional ways of viewing it, which detract from the commonly accepted narratives of discovery and Christianization. In fact Bautista’s study transcends nostalgia and critiques the symbol of the Santo Niño.

Throughout the book Bautista juxtaposes episodes that present various approaches to the Santo Niño as a religious symbol. “The Ins and Outs of the Santo Niño de Cebu” (chapter 1) locates the image in its “official” place, i.e., inside the Basilica of the Santo Niño, and its “popular” place outside the church. Inside the church the “official” veneration and structured worship include acts like bowing, waving, and kissing of the image; the formal rites of worship in the basilica represent permitted gestures of faith. Outside the basilica, however, worship is more spontaneous. The author describes how the Santo Niño is found in various places: store windows, jeepneys, and in other “mundane and utilitarian spaces” (43). “Outside” represents the flamboyant and unorthodox ways of paying respect to the image. But “outside” also signifies the Santo Niño’s presence in the quotidian, without demanding from the Cebuanos solemn acts of worship. More than sacralizing these spaces, the presence of Santo Niño replicas in mundane places shows the devotion’s deep-rootedness in the Cebuanos’ habitus.

“An Archipelago Twice ‘Discovered’” (chapter 2) discusses how the Santo Niño figures in the two instances of “discovery.” The first was Ferdinand

Magellan’s arrival in Cebu in 1521 and his bequeathal of the image to the island’s rulers. The second occurred four decades after Magellan’s failed attempt to conquer the Visayas. Miguel Lopez de Legazpi’s arrival and the crew’s discovery of the image, protected and worshipped by the natives, signaled the recommencement of Spain’s mission in the Philippines. These discourses of discovery evince the inextricable connection between the colonization of the Philippines and its Christianization, a process the Santo Niño aided. The rediscovery of the image was taken as a seal of approval from heaven on Spain’s plans to expand its territory and spread Catholicism on this side of the world.

Bautista looks into the fate of the Santo Niño during the American period in chapter 3 (“The Icon Survives”). He argues that the interplay of “American colonial policy and Filipino responses to it determined to a great extent the Santo Niño’s contemporary prominence” (78). He juxtaposes two approaches to the Santo Niño—Catholicism and Protestantism—as though the clash of the two religions was mediated by the symbol of the Child Jesus. American Protestants looked deprecatingly on Filipino Catholic worship, which centered on the veneration of icons and offended Protestant sensibilities. They blamed the Spanish missionaries for these practices and hoped to sanitize Filipino Christianity. However, despite American condemnation of “idolatrous” practices, devotion to the Santo Niño remained vibrant in Cebu. Bautista believes that, in tolerating devotion to the Santo Niño, “the Roman Catholic Church was able to maintain the sentimental loyalty of Filipinos” (90).

In chapter 4, “The Philippines for Christ,” Bautista discusses how the Cebu-centered icon became a national image. To do so he juxtaposes the celebration of two “founding” anniversaries of the Filipino nation: the 1921 Magallanes carnival, which celebrated the first contact with the Spaniards in 1521, and the 1965 quadricentennial of the Santo Niño, which commemorated the rediscovery of the Santo Niño. Bautista creatively analyzes the discourses underpinning each celebration. American Protestant ideals underpinned the 1921 Magallanes carnival in Manila; any features of Catholicism were obscured by “frolics, dancing and jesting” (119). The primarily secular celebration was headed by Trinidad Pardo de Tavera, who wanted to “break away from the Spanish colonial past in favor of building a new nation along the lines of science and an American sense of justice, not on a Catholic faith that ‘condemns all modern ideas’” (17–18). In contrast

Catholic discourse buttressed the 1965 celebration in Cebu to commemorate the beginning of Christianity in the Philippines. Bautista argues that it was in this celebration that “the Santo Niño had ‘figured’ as the unifying symbol of Filipino Christianity. It was an event that created the religious lingua franca in which the Santo Niño could be nationally articulated” (120).

Chapter 5 (“The Syncretic Santo Niño”) is an inquiry into “the processes by which the figure symbolizes a distinctive type of Filipino Catholicism that synthesizes the modern and the ancient, the official and the sensational, the pagan and the enlightened” (16). It discusses how syncretism or hybridity can be embedded in a discourse of “persistence” and “tolerance.” What remains in the discourse of persistence are the enduring prehispanic religious practices combined with Catholic rituals, while the annual fiestas become patent in the discourse of tolerance. The Sinulog sa Sugbo annual celebration, now emblematic of Cebu, is a collective expression of popular devotion to the Santo Niño, sanctioned by Catholic authorities. Bautista claims that this festival is proof of the Catholic Church’s tolerance of syncretism.

“The Rebellion and the Icon” (chapter 6) is a discussion on the use of religious icons, particularly the images of the Santo Niño and the Virgin Mary, in mass uprisings like the 1986 People Power Revolution. The presence of these images in these “holy revolutions” signifies divine intervention that legitimizes the people’s cause against their rulers. However, Bautista elucidates that divine power does not inhere in the icons themselves. Mass uprisings have a rightful claim on divine inspiration only after they have been convoked by the prescribed religious authority.

In chapter 7, “The Prodigious Child and *Bata Nga Allah*,” Bautista looks into how nationalist and regional discourses have provided other readings of the Santo Niño as a deity that originates from prehispanic times and is thus indigenous. These discourses are motivated by an agenda to find Filipino identities that are divorced from either the colonial or national discourse. The author ably demonstrates the Santo Niño as a “conceptually ‘floating’ signifier” that “oscillate[s] between competing accounts of local origins or moving across varied agendas of searching for a definitive, yet estranged sense of *Bisayan* (as opposed to a national) soul” (194–95). Bautista closes his work in chapter 8, stating that it “point[s] not only to what the Santo Niño is, but to the question of who Filipinos say the Santo Niño is” (207).

With adept use of the notions of symbol and materiality, coupled with discourse analysis, Bautista unpacks the layers of meaning attached to the

Santo Niño de Cebu. In presenting the process by which the Santo Niño became a popular religious symbol he shows the distinctive features of Filipino Catholicism. His critical stance on the discursive techniques that different parties use to privilege or dismiss the Holy Child’s image encourages readers to value the role of discourse in the construction of religious symbols. Bautista’s work is an invaluable reference for future works on other Filipino religious icons.

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ROMEO B. GALANG JR.

A Cultural History of Santo Domingo

Manila: UST Publishing House, 2013. 178 pages.

To the twenty-first-century mind, it may be hard to reconcile the relic that Intramuros has become with what was once the bustling center and seat of Spanish power in the Philippine Islands. This challenge of enlivening the imagining of old Intramuros Romeo B. Galang Jr. takes up in *A Cultural History of Santo Domingo*. Galang obtained his MA Art History from the University of the Philippines Diliman and currently teaches courses on literature and the humanities at Far Eastern University. This book is based on his thesis, which benefited from a grant from the Spanish Program for Cultural Cooperation. Published by the UST Publishing House, the book looks at accounts that cover four centuries of the ecclesiastical complex, specifically that of Santo Domingo. It aims to show how such an institution was able to “bring forth a distinctive cultural life for the people of the city” (2). Its themes include colonial aesthetics; the role of geography and climate; power relations between church and state; issues of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class; and even “Asian customs and traditions” (9)—a daunting task for a book containing a little over 150 pages of text.